

HOMILY—FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY
HUMANAE VITAE

Mass celebrated 26 July 2008
Sacred Heart School of Theology Hales Corners, WI
Most Reverend William Patrick Callahan

I am happy and honored to be with you today. We celebrate the feast of Sts. Joachim and Anne, Jesus' grandpa and grandma, and we mark the fortieth anniversary of Pope Paul VI's landmark encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. As a priest for over thirty-one years, this encyclical has played a significant part of my pastoral life and has lent incredible strength to my preaching for the sake of human life and its sacredness. In preparation for this reflection, however, I was surprised at one consistent point that seems to stand out in all of the information I have read: priests are afraid to speak about this encyclical and about life issues in general.

It is not difficult to understand why there is such fear. I know that when I have devoted quality homily time to the topic of human life and issues of procreation and morality—condemning contraception and abortion—I have been met with some of the most fierce—almost irrational—confrontations with people who have been literally “in my face” with anger, profanity, and general comments that could only be attributed to the power of the evil that battles against positive moral principles in our society.

Fear of reprisal or even attack from others has seriously debilitated the work of priests, theologians and medical professionals to speak out on these moral issues. What is worse, though, is that we have treated

Humanae Vitae as if it were some kind of embarrassment—a remnant of the “old Church” that somehow did not understand the changes that Vatican II was supposed to accomplish in the “new Church.” It was some sort of ancient albatross around the neck of a Church that was seeking to redefine itself in the “new age.”

The exodus of priests and nuns, the proliferation of popular culture as the new age panacea for correct social behavior, the changes in seminary structures and preparations for the priesthood, public declarations defiantly leading to willful disobedience and disregard, all led to the gathering momentum of discarding the Papal teaching as so much ecclesiastical button shoes. The “modern” Church was embarrassed by Humanae Vitae.

That embarrassment cost us much in terms of lost opportunity to clearly identify the central mysteries of human love and God’s plan for human relationships. The lost opportunity has made us clumsy and ambivalent when speaking about human love and authentic intimacy. Embarrassment about Humanae Vitae over the past forty years has cost the Church dearly.

Forty years is a long time. Generations have grown in the Church without clearly understanding or even knowing authentic Catholic moral teaching.

I do believe, however, that we may have turned the corner on this sad condition. The antidote is already being administered. A new generation of Catholics is coming alive—a generation that has grown up unbeguiled by the agenda of the Sixties or the relentless pursuit of change that has occurred so haphazardly and rapaciously. This generation is not held to

ideological agenda, but seeks to open themselves more fully to the compliment of the Church's wisdom. The teachings of Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*, that so boldly prophesied many of the tragic realities of the present social condition have been ratified by the profound beauty and depth of Pope John Paul's *Theology of the Body*. Into our own day Pope Benedict XVI enlarges the stage by addressing issues of humanity's hope that is found only in the Person of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In his writings and in his most recent visit to the United States, Pope Benedict has addressed the rampant secularism and relativism that has found its way deep into the fiber of the contemporary human community. He has invited all men and women to come to deeper awareness of the person of Jesus Christ. In coming to know Christ, the human person is freed from the slavery of selfishness and boredom. Meeting Jesus is relational; He invites us through faith to "break open the horizon beyond our own selves in order to see life as God does." God's unconditional love...points to a meaning and purpose for all human life." (Meeting with Young People, Dunwoodie, 19 April)

The transformation that is gradually taking shape in the Church through the teachings of the Popes in our age is staggering. The pendulum shifts that mark the ages are bringing with them a new development and understanding of Catholic moral teaching. In this light, *Humanae Vitae* can truly be seen as a vital document that has always borne the burden of truth and continues the Church's valid and unbroken union with the author of Truth Himself.

We must have no fear about the proclamation of the Gospel of Life and we must not be deterred by the forces in this world that seek to silence the messengers. Was it not our Blessed Lord Himself who told us to “Fear no one”? Was it not He who exhorted us that “Whoever acknowledges me before men I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; and whoever disowns me before men I will disown before my Father in heaven”?

(Mt.10:32-33)

We must be aware of the truth that rises in the soul of humanity as we seek to understand the value and meaning of our existence. At St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York, Pope Benedict emphasized that the Church and all its members are “called to proclaim the gift of life, to serve life, and to promote a culture of life. ... The proclamation of life, life in abundance, must be the heart of the new evangelization. For true life—our salvation—can only be found in the reconciliation, freedom and love which are God’s gracious gift. This is the message of hope we are called to proclaim and embody.”

As we celebrate the anniversary of a landmark gospel teaching, prophetically inspired by the Holy Spirit and dramatically emblazoned upon the conscience of humanity, let us remember that we are the Church of Jesus Christ and in His name, we preach and live the Gospel of Life.